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AUTHOR MacDonald, Susan Peck
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ABSTRACT

Inexperienced writers can become inspired researchers when they are allowed and encouraged to write about what matters to them. The traditional research paper assignment inflicts torture on students in two ways: (1) by the process it demands--basically a frenzied series of new learning tasks; and (2) by the mystery surrounding its codes--rarely do students know why certain procedures and conventions are important or even who their real audience is. Work with two sets of students in university level Educational Opportunities Program (EOP) rhetoric classes bears out these observations. One set of students worked on research topics triggered by personal experience, most often problems related to their minority backgrounds. The other set worked on topics developed through a more traditional, impersonal approach to the research paper, but even some of these students managed to create more interesting papers by injecting some elements of their personalities into the process. The experience of these students seems to indicate that inexperienced writers can discover for themselves the true process of academic research if they are allowed to bring personal commitment--and therefore a true purpose and sense of audience--to their work. (JL)

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Susan Peck MacDonald
English Department
University of Illinois
608 S. Wright St.
Urbana, Illinois 61801

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"Can I Write About My Life?"

The Research Paper and the Inexperienced Writer

by

Susan Peck MacDonald

Last semester I was talking to a freshman with grave writing problems. Had she, I asked, had trouble with writing in high school? "Not really," she replied, "I got B's. But it wasn't that hard. Mostly we did research papers, and I didn't have to write very much in between the quotes." Another student last semester, this one a transfer from a junior college, seemed absolutely ignorant of what a research paper was. "Can I write about my life?," he asked. I told him he couldn't--that that wouldn't be research. Since then, however, I have come to see that the answer to "Can I write about my life?" should be far more complex--that inexperienced writers can become inspired researchers when they are allowed and encouraged to write about what matters to them.[1]

For inexperienced students such as these two, the traditional, long, research paper simply does not work. Even with experienced students it probably works--if it works at all--not because we teach it to them, but because they have already discovered for themselves what it is, whether through good

schooling, plentiful reading, or research-minded parents. But the inexperienced freshman has not yet been initiated into the mysteries of our academic rites and so is dependent upon our teaching. The inexperienced writer may be an eighteen-year old admitted in an open admissions policy, a returning veteran, a retired serviceman, a mother returned to school after raising children, or a highly ambitious and capable minority student whose own schooling has been somehwat deficient. I use the word "inexperienced" rather than "remedial" because this group of non-traditional students displays a very wide range of abilities. But they share a lack of experience with the conventions of academic writing. For inexperienced students the way we teach such academic tasks as the research paper will determine whether the assignment proves to be an exciting adventure, an insight into college and learning, and a tool for succeeding at other courses, or proof that they are failures, outsiders, people who do not belong in college.

The traditional freshman research paper inflicts torture on students in two ways: by the process it demands and by the mystery surrounding its codes. The process itself is usually telescoped into four to eight weeks spent in a frenzy of learning new tasks. The usual sequence consists of the following steps: 1) choosing a topic, 2) consulting bibliographies, indexes, abstracts, and encyclopedias, 3) developing a working bibliography, 4) finding one's way in the library, 5) locating sources that are not already checked out, stolen, mutilated, or unavailable in one's library, 6) writing an outline, 7) writing a draft, 8) citing source material, 9) writing the final version, 10) typing the paper, and 11) typing footnotes and bibliography. Each one of these eleven tasks could be further subdivided into its component skills; citing source material alone (step 8) is an exceedingly complicated

matter for students who may not know, for instance, that a researcher should not be referred to by his or her first name.

Each of these eleven (or more) steps involves pitfalls for students, pitfalls that threaten to derail them from swift and purposeful movement along the track to their deadline. To take just one example, the inexperienced writer in consulting bibliographies or indexes may not know what a bibliography is ("a card catalog without the numbers" one student decided after some initial puzzlement), may think the abstract of an article is the article, may not realize the Business Periodicals Index of 1978 will not contain information about articles published in 1976 or 1979, may, in trying to find a bibliography, not be able to tell which number comes first on the shelf, 016.30142 or 016.301412.

In demanding this series of at least eleven new skills, each one subdivisible into many subskills, we frighten students with the thought that if they fail at any one step they will fail at the whole assignment. Furthermore, we imply that no one of these skills is more important than any other; we do not encourage students to see the whole assignment in a hierarchical manner with their purpose at the top of the hierarchy and the minutiae of footnoting at the bottom--there only to serve their larger purpose. We need to find ways to teach some of the library skills and the footnoting skills separately so that students can gain the confidence that comes from mastering individual skills before they have to put them to use all at once on one important assignment.

But the burdens we create by our unrealistic timetable for learning so many skills are not the only problems we create for students. From their

standpoint the rules of the game appear painfully mysterious. Students often sense that the teacher knows the rules but isn't telling. "I don't understand what you want," they say to us. The research paper creates the problems that it does because it is simultaneously a highly codified and a highly undefined activity.

Students, for instance, are baffled by citing sources and by the apparatus of footnotes or bibliographies. They have no compelling purpose for suddenly rushing to the library to become authorities on child abuse for the benefit of their English teacher--and no genuine audience. They know their English teacher will read their papers, not from any burning desire to know more about child abuse, but in order to see whether students have mastered the form of the paper itself.

The organization of the paper may puzzle them also because quite often they have not written anything longer than a three or four-page essay for freshman composition until suddenly we expect them to be able to organize a ten or twelve-page paper. In despair, they try to find a topic big enough to serve for three separate three or four-page papers--with disastrous results.

And, finally, they are novices whose respect for authority and academia inhibits them from finding the authoritative voice that we know true researchers use in discussing their research. We write with authority because we know more about our subjects and because we don't usually write unless we feel some urgency about what we have to say. Students will only begin to write with authority when we make clear to them that they should choose a subject that matters to them; they will stop pasting together quotations from their "authorities"

only when we teach them that they should become authorities themselves--with a thesis controlling their material and a voice demanding to be heard.

Within our profession we probably agree that students write better when they write about something they know and care about, but we probably do not agree about the consequences of that belief. Some may feel that students need to write about what they don't know about for biology or history and that we must prepare them for college writing by not simply allowing them to write what they know about. Indeed, expressive discourse often does not prepare a student for expository writing. But if we stop thinking of expressive writing as the opposite of research and think of research as a process informed by the personal history, emotions, desires, and theories of the researcher, then perhaps the research paper presents the ideal way to break down the dichotomy between that form of expression which is subjective and non-academic and that form of research which has no thesis, purpose or audience.

The inexperienced writer may need to approach the research paper with personal convictions, interests, or theories ready to be explored--far more so than the traditional student who is often able to create a sense of purpose or audience simply from familiarity with the ways academics write. In a preliminary study of how students select topics for the research paper, I have distributed questionnaires to students in the E.O.P. Rhetoric program at the University of Illinos.[2] These students have received a great deal of personal attention from librarians in focussing and exploring their topics, but the topics and focus are ultimately their own in that the librarians have acted as interpretors and guides only. Even with individualized help from their teachers and librarians, some students do not seem to be able to choose a topic that is well-focussed and that interests them. Among the students who do seem to have

gotten off to a good start, the topics seem to fall into four classes.

One set of students is working from direct personal experience. A student whose mother was an alcoholic and then was cured through Alcoholics Anonymous chose to write on that organization--and did so with more conviction and a stronger organizing and unifying voice than is sometimes found in the research paper. A student whose aunt died of cancer a few years ago is researching the ethics of euthanasia, even delving into the original nineteenth-century statutes from British law. A third student researching the problem of environment vs. heredity writes, "On the ACT and SAT I didn't do too good. Also, the school I went to was a good school, but it wasn't too good for college courses. I believe that the environment, not heredity, influences one's intelligence." This student is approaching his research paper with a strong purpose--a desire to think better of himself and a determination to do so not subjectively or irrationally, but by objective research. A fourth student is researching the psychological effects names have upon children because as a child she was frequently kidded about her last name. In doing so she is attempting to turn a painful experience into a general lesson for others, a movement from the particular to the general that we all claim to want to see in our students' work.

A second set of students is attempting to interpret experiences their new roommates or friends have had. As new freshmen living away from home for the first time, they quickly come to know a great deal about their new friends and are in some cases struck by their friends' problems. One student researching the effects of divorce on children writes of his topic, "My roommate had confrontations with his mother because she left him when he was five or six." Another student is writing about the dehumanization of black athletes, a topic triggered by her having met some black football players. A third student became curious about the effects upon a teenager of having her mother die, as had

happened to two of her new acquaintances. In each case these students have had their curiosity triggered by experience and have turned their own perceptions of others' experiences into a source for research. In the process they demonstrate: 1) interest, 2) interpretive activity, and then 3) the activity of seeking external confirmation of their interpretations.

By far the largest set of topics among these students in our minority admissions program consists of either the past or the present problems of minorities; these topics range from an interest in roots to an interest in political action. A Chinese student, for instance, studying the problems of Chinese assimilation into American culture, writes, "I am Chinese, second generation. Morals ingrained upon me by my parents differ tremendously from the American mainstream. A dilemma occurs, due to the diffision of my identity." An hispanic student doing research on Latin gangs in Chicago writes, "Gangs are part of my personal life. I've known gangs for about 16 years. I've known members and I've known people who have been shot and killed for being in a gang or for just relating with a gang." He hopes to find that the gangs were not started to raise terror and that gangs could in the future start doing good for the community. In his merging of personal experience, historical research, and hope for the future, this student provides a model of the kind of purposefulness we would like to see in research. Some of the other topics foucssed on minority experience are: 1) a criticism of the effects of capitalism on Kenya (by a black student who sees Africa as the "Motherland"), 2) an investigation of whether Austria intentionally sent Archduke Ferdinand into Serbia knowing he would be assassinated (by a student wanting "to find out more about [his own] Serbian background"), 3) the nature of day to day resistance to slavery (by a black student), 4) a study of unequal police protection in different areas of Chicago (by a black student who writes,"Police protection in my neighborhood has been and still is decreasing very fast."),

5) a study of the origins of the Black Baptist Church (by a student who writes, "I go to Church every Sunday and sometimes during the week. This is the majority of my social life."), 6) a study of "the emotional and mental prices paid by successful Black businessmen" (by a black student considering going into business), 7) a study of the "Zoot Suit Riots" (by a hispanic student interested in whether the hispanic Zoot Suiters of Los Angeles in the 1940's were in part the victims of racial prejudice), 8) a study of the economic impact of illegal aliens (by a Mexican -American student), and 9) a comparison of the Russian and Franch revolutions (by a Mexican-American student, who has lived here since 1969). This last student writes of his ultimate concern, "There is no unity at all between the South American governments. They are all going through revolutions but different countries support different factions because it is to their best interest, not caring about the people involved." This student (majoring in engineering, not history) sees the Russian and French revolutions as laboratories for the study of whether revolutionary power is better concentrated in one group or in frequently warring political factions; like the student interested in Latin gangs, this student intends to use history for the purpose of changing the status quo.

In each of the examples cited above, the student works from some sort of personal interest, but another set of topics appears to have no personal source at all. One student writes on the cultural effects of the explosion of Krakatoa - a topic arrived at after reading an example in his rhetoric text. Another student writes on women spies in the civil war - a topic suggested by something he came across in the card catalog. One future scientist is writing about Tellico Dam and the snail darter, another about the possibility of a second ice age. The most intriguing of these to me, however, is one student's study of the shoot-out at the O.K. Corral. The student (an engineering

major) came upon his topic by chance while browsing in the library. At first he wanted to find out whether there were any blacks at the O.K. Corral. Soon, however, he shifted his focus to demonstrating that the shoot-out was a set up and a slaughter. He is delving into eyewitness reports and newspaper accounts in order to show that sources can be biased and that the Wyatt Earp of legend is different from the Wyatt Earp of fact. Both his use of sources and his realization that they can be prejudiced are highly sophisticated. When I asked why he chose this particular topic, he replied that he likes to prove other people are wrong. He added that he likes engineering because it's easy to prove other people are wrong in engineering. This student has successfully learned the researcher's mentality--1) looking for the truth, 2) being wary of biased data, and 3) proving others wrong--and has learned to use that mentality in a field far different from his own. I am delighted at his and the other students' achievements.

Among writing teachers it is probably axiomatic that students write better on subjects they know and care about, but the systems we erect upon this axiom are not so clear.[3] One temptation is to reason as follows: 1) inexperienced writers are even more likely than traditional students to show a drop in writing ability when they turn from personal to impersonal writing, 2) therefore inexperienced writers should begin with more expressive forms of discourse and/or should write about their own experience, and as a result 3) these students should not have the research paper inflicted upon them. Thus in teaching inexperienced writers we may be more willing to assign a comparison/contrast paper on a topic like high school vs. college than to assign a research paper.

But perhaps it is harder for inexperienced students to dredge up material from their memories than to do research. The student mentioned above who is doing research on the Tellico Dam this semester considered doing a comparison/contrast paper last semester on the difference between snow and not snow--just the sort of assignment that wearies teacher and student from its lack of purpose or voice. Perhaps some of the memories students could exploit for personal writing are either too permeated by a thesis for the student to be able to see what needs to be elaborated or perhaps the memories are too unfocussed for them to decide which of many theses they might use. Perhaps if it can be humanized by greater flexibility about its timetable and its paraphernalia, the research paper is the assignment that can bridge the gap between personal caring and objective information.

The results of my questionnaire suggest that inexperienced writers who are given freedom to choose a topic for themselves and given a great deal of personal help from librarians will learn for themselves that essential role of academics: the active, purposeful scholar searching for objective and theoretical grounds for supporting a thesis the writer/scholar cares about.[4] These students are active; they are doing origianl research by looking at nineteenth-century legal documents or newspapers, contracts interviews.

In the process they are learning to succeed and, as a result, are gaining self-confidence.[5] The student who compares high school to college has no internal way of sensing whether she/he is succeeding or not; the interprise is too nebulous. But the student looking for the truth about Wyatt Earp's character succeeeds every time he locates a piece of information. The success is objective, external, and therefore immediately reinforcing.

These students are also learning about the hierarchical nature of doing research and writing; in pursuit of the information they need, they are learning to use what does and reject what does not bear upon their theses. They are learning to distinguish between goals and means, between ideas and tools for exploring them.

For the lack of audience and purpose in the traditional research paper, they are substituting their own audiences (themselves, people they would like to convince) and their own purposes. And in doing so they are learning what is at the heart of all our academic phenomena - the proper balancing of the observing, theorizing self with inert, opaque, external material that is observed. The paraphernalia and timetable of the traditional research paper are so burdensome that they may stand in the way for some; we should explore alternatives. But the essential research activity of choosing a topic, doing research on it, and then synthesizing that research is an activity that inexperienced writers can enter into with remarkable energy.

Footnotes:

[1]I would like to thank the following people for the help or inspiration they have provided on this subject: Betsy Wilson and Lori Arp of the University of Illinois Undergraduate Library for giving countless hours of individual attention to some 250 students in our program; the graduate teaching assistants in E.O.P. Rhetoric; the students themselves who are constantly teaching us; and the student who intelligent question, "Can I write about my life?," has forced me to reconsider some of my basic assumptions.

[2]The Educational Opportunities Program at Illinois is a special admissions program for minority students. They are far from being the kind of students found in an open admissions policy, however, and would be regularly admitted at most other Illinois schools. Most take two semesters of E.O.P. Rhetoric and do the research paper in the second of the two semesters.

[3]This axiom is present in varying forms, for instance, in Albert Kitzhaber, see Themes, Theories, and Therapy: The Teaching of Writing in College (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc. 1963), pp. 57-8, or Lou Kelly, "Toward Competence and Creativity in an Open Class," College English, 34 (1973), . Sondra Perl found that one ofher subjects, Tony wrote more fluently when the topic was close to his own experience: see "The Composing Processes on Unskilled College Writers," Research in Teaching English, 13, (1979), 317-336. Kyle Fiore and Nan Elsasser have reported some very interesting results in working with Bahamian women who start by writing about their own problems and improve their writing and understanding as they consider those problems in wider contexts; see "A Liberatory Literacy Curriculum," College English, 44, (1982), 115-128.

[4]At schools where librarians are not so available or not so helpful, teachers may not want to turn their students loose int the way we have been able to do because they will not want students to flounder in frustration.

[5]Mary Edel Denman has shown that students who improve their writing skills also improve their scores on the California Psychological Inventory measuring such qualities as self-confidence, confidence of success, ability to be adventuresome, and adaptability; see "Personality Changes Concomitant with Learning Writing," Research in Teaching English, 15 (1981), 170-171.